Equity and educators enacting the Australian early years learning framework

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The mandated learning framework, Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) is part of a suite of reforms currently being undertaken in early childhood education in Australia. All educators working in direct contact with young children from birth to the age of five are required to use the Framework. The reforms are aimed at achieving higher quality and greater equity of early childhood education throughout Australia. This article contemplates the equity of the Framework when the workforce required to use it is diverse and ranges from those who are degree, associate or diploma qualified, to becoming qualified. It considers the implicit construct of the ideal professional practitioner in the policy and the social justice effects of the policy. The article concludes that political concerns about a certain group of educators have been reduced to matters of technical efficiency and that as a consequence, the values of social justice and equity for this group have been subsumed to align with dominant economic imperatives.

Keywords: early years; equity; policy; qualifications; workforce

Introduction

In 2009, the Commonwealth of Australia published a learning framework for children from birth to the age of five called *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (the Framework) (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [AG], 2009). This *Framework*, or an approved alternative, became mandatory from 1 January 2012[1] and is to contribute to realising the Council of Australian Government's (COAG) human capital vision that "All children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and the nation" (AG, 2009, p. 5). The *Framework* is part of a suite of early childhood educational reforms currently taking place in Australia that involve replacing existing legislative and regulatory systems that were set and administered by individual states and territories with a recently introduced national approach. They include a national quality assurance/regulatory system and national body called the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACEQA), established in 2011. The reforms aim to "improve outcomes for the majority of children but specifically Indigenous children and the most disadvantaged; and increase productivity and international competitiveness" (COAG, 2009a, p. 13). Part of the suite is a National Quality Framework (NQF), the purpose of which is to provide "better educational and developmental outcomes for children using education and care services" (ACECQA, 2015a). This is to be achieved through a

national quality standard that is to "improve education and care across long day care, family day care, preschool/kindergarten, and outside school hours care" (ACECQA, 2015a). While the reforms are wide ranging, in this paper we focus our attention on the *Framework* and its use in long day care and preschool/kindergarten settings.

This article presents a critical analysis of the equity implications for educators[2] who are required to enact the *Framework*. The *Framework* adopts an approach of social justice and equity toward children and their families, but this does not seem to apply to all educators. By equity, we mean "who gets what, when and how" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 76), and our purpose here is to question whether it is equitable to expect the lowest paid and least qualified educators to enact the *Framework* in similar ways to the highest paid and most highly qualified. The difference is between those with certificate or diploma qualifications (or in the process of becoming qualified) and those who are qualified teachers with bachelor or master degrees. The critical analysis draws on two of Rizvi and Lingard's (2010) key questions for policy analysis: "What is the implied 'ideal professional practitioner' in the policy?" (p. 55); and "What are the social justice effects of the policy?" (p. 56). To investigate these two questions, the paper examines the ways in which power and inequity operate to further marginalize early childhood educators who are not qualified teachers, denying them equitable representation or political voice in decisions that affect their everyday work and how they are required to do it. It investigates under-explored issues and makes two claims: first, that it is inequitable to expect educators in long day care and preschool settings to engage in tasks customarily required of qualified teachers when educators have entirely different qualifications and employment conditions (e.g., permanent/part time/casual; differences in remuneration, holidays, leave) (see Cumming, Sumsion & Wong, 2015; Woodrow, 2007); and second, that it will be difficult to realise the aims of the policy given that the process of policy enactment demands so much of educators with diverse qualifications.

To do this, the paper begins by exploring whether the emphasis on human capital in the *Framework*, which is characteristic of neoliberalism, has rearticulated the values of social justice and equity to align with "dominant economic concerns" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 72). The arguments made also draw on Fraser's (2007, 2008a) understandings of representative justice, i.e., the right of all members of a community to participate actively in decision making in political spaces, or to be represented equitably. We then turn our attention to the mandated policy (the *Framework*), which is a central part of the Australian early childhood education reforms. This is followed by an investigation of the work that early childhood educators and qualified early childhood teachers are expected to undertake according to the *Framework*. To conclude, we revisit aspects of history, equity and philosophy as they apply to enactment of the *Framework*.

Theories of justice and the *Framework*

Ideas of political, cultural and economic justice involve representative, recognitive and redistributive justice respectively (Fraser, 1997, 2007). To Fraser (2007), justice "requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life" (p. 17). Her view of justice as "participatory parity" is based on the idea that "overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction" (p. 17). Participatory parity involves going beyond recognizing experiences of disadvantage and marginality to focusing on specific injustices, such as those implicit in education reform policies. For a more specific focus on the matter of redistributive justice, we refer to liberal-humanism, market-individualism and social democracy (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), three philosophical approaches linked with educational policy, social justice and equity.

In the case of those who are not qualified teachers being required to use the *Framework*, we suggest that a market-individualism approach, where investment in education occurs mostly in economic terms, is operating. This creates a climate where those who are not qualified teachers (as well as those who are) "sell their skills on the market" and issues of "educational justice are sidelined" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 158). In contrast to liberal-humanism, which seeks social justice by redistributing societal resources more fairly, market-individualism rejects redistributive ideas in favour of market principles of economic and social exchange. Through this lens, educators who are not qualified teachers are conceived in individualistic neoliberal human capital or economic terms and valued for their skills and their capacity for "training and retraining, skilling and reskilling, [and] enhancement of credentials" (Rose, 1999, p. 160-161).

By contrast, social democracy emphasises "person rights" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 158), which include democratic principles, rights and responsibilities, as well as access to "participation in decision-making, and reciprocity in relations of power and authority" (p. 158). Where person rights are not respected, the state intervenes "in and against the market to ensure an acceptable level of equality/inequality thought necessary to protect person rights" (p. 158). It is our contention in this paper that, in the case being considered, the state has *not* intervened to protect person rights, but has rather created a situation whereupon those rights are at greater risk of being impinged.

Distributive approaches to social justice (liberal-humanism, market-individualism, social democracy) have some merit when wealth and income are considered, but are inadequate for "moral concerns such as respect, recognition, rights, opportunities and power" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 160). These concerns underpin our analysis of the *Framework*. Our unease about those educators who are not qualified teachers being required to enact practices associated with the work of qualified teachers relates to moral concerns of representation, respect, recognition, rights, opportunities and power. We also refer to Fraser's (2008a) understanding of representative justice: the right of all members of a community to participate actively in decision making in political spaces (political justice) or to be represented equitably.

It is our understanding that this did not occur with the *Framework*. Even though consultation was part of the process of developing the *Framework* (see Sumsion et al., 2009), it is difficult to see how "institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction" (Fraser, 2007, p. 17) were overcome or dismantled. Examples of institutional obstacles include release from duties to attend consultations held during the day, and access to technologies to respond to an online forum run by the government department responsible for the reforms.

In the remainder of this paper, we examine how the *Framework* positions educators in early childhood education and what is expected of them in order to highlight potential equity implications and injustices that may flow from them. To scaffold our approach, we begin by examining the historical, functional and pedagogical differences within the early childhood/prior-to-school sector. We then consider the first of Rizvi and Lingard's questions, which focuses on the implied 'ideal professional practitioner', by examining the tasks the *Framework* requires of educators against the qualifications that the majority hold.

Policy enactment and qualifications

Policy enactment for qualified teachers has become increasingly difficult in recent years due to the proliferation of education policies, the rapidity of changes to curriculum, pedagogy and legislative requirements, as well as the development of more exacting accountability frameworks (see Ball, 2013, for a sociological approach to current educational policy analysis

that addresses, amongst other matters, issues related to equity). School education researchers Braun, Maguire and Ball (2010) use the term 'policy enactment' because, in their view, policies are "interpreted and 'translated' by diverse policy actors in the school environment, rather than simply implemented" (p. 549). They describe policy enactment as a "creative, sophisticated and complex process" (p. 549), as *teachers* are now "expected to be familiar with, and able to implement, multiple (and sometimes contradictory) policies that are planned for them by others". Teachers are "held accountable for this task" (pp. 547-548) but, because policy makers "do not normally take account of the complexity of policy enactment environments" (pp. 547-548), the commitment and professional skills that policy enactment require remain underappreciated and unanticipated by government.

Given the increasing focus on government regulation of early childhood education in Australia (Fenech, Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2008), such as the requirement to use the *Framework* or an approved alternative, the difficulty of policy enactment is now as true of prior-to school settings as it is of compulsory school education. There are, however, significant differences between these two worlds in terms of minimum qualifications and education levels required of front-line staff. These differences are brought about by distinct histories and disparities in knowledge and skills required by educators in the two sectors. Exploring some of these differences shows how this group of non-qualified teachers has been marginalized, making it difficult to effect a political voice in decisions that affect their everyday work and how they are required to do it.

The policies in early childhood education in Australia being addressed here are mandatory, yet the qualifications of educators required to enact these policies in long day care and preschool settings in Australia vary widely from becoming qualified, to certificate and diploma qualified staff, to those who are qualified teachers with bachelor and, in some cases, master degrees. Changes in qualification requirements and changes to staff/child ratios are part of the early childhood reform agenda in Australia. Until recently, New South Wales has been the only state required to employ qualified teachers in long day care settings (Cheeseman & Torr, 2009; Fenech et al., 2008), however, the recently introduced National Quality Standard (NQS) requires degree qualified early childhood educators to be employed in all long day care settings (Council of Australian Government [COAG], 2009a). This reform is being phased in over the next few years and transition arrangements are in place for qualification requirements for preschool and long day care settings, with requirements varying according to the number of children in attendance at any time. There is also a time frame for compliance (see ACECQA, 2012; COAG, 2009b; Standing Committee on School Education and Early Childhood, 2012).

These legislated policy changes have attempted to respond to some of the workforce challenges experienced by the before school sector, such as increasing the numbers of more highly qualified educators, attending to staff/child ratios, supporting professional learning, and through some of these changes, reducing staff turnover and staff shortages, and improving wages and conditions. The policy changes require an increase in the number of qualified educators, however, there is still a big difference between the NQS (COAG, 2009a) and professional, evidence-based recommendations about high quality child care in terms of teacher qualifications and staff/child ratios (Fenech, Giugni & Brown, 2012). The staffing requirements and proposed staff/child ratios in the NQS do improve previous requirements in some states and territories but Fenech et al. (2012) suggest that they will "not signify improved standards and higher quality for all children, and certainly not at the level that research suggests supports high quality" (p. 8). The point is that the increase in the number of qualified educators (i.e., qualified teachers) is not significant enough to support the provision

of high quality early childhood education. According to Fenech et al. (2012), these staged legislated policy changes are, at best, a modest expression of the difference that teacher qualifications and staff/child ratios can make to child outcomes (see Sylva et al., 2010 for the difference qualified teachers make in before school settings).

Staff turnover and staff shortages are complex matters. They are also connected to the lack of status associated with the childcare field (Productivity Commission, 2011). Like many other countries, maternalistic discourses of professionalism have been highly influential in Australian before-school contexts and have contributed to professionals being undervalued because of the association of educators with motherhood and natural instincts (Ailwood, 2008). Lack of status often brings low wages, poor working conditions, and high staff turnover. The Productivity Commission (2011) recognized that wages are disproportionate with the skill and responsibility required of educators, and that educators work in a more stressful occupation than those receiving similar remuneration in other sectors. Staff shortages are also associated with the retention of early childhood educators with diploma and university qualifications (Productivity Commission, 2011; Ishimine, Tayler & Thorpe, 2009), especially as qualified teachers often find work in early primary school settings because of better wages and conditions (Cheeseman & Torr, 2009; Productivity Commission, 2011). Compared with international figures, staff turnover is high (Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council, 2006), and a lack of leaders can produce situations where staff can be promoted without the requisite knowledge, skills and experience (Bretherton, 2010). The government is committed to reform but these ongoing challenges about staff and status of the field suggest that reform is limited to what is possible within an economic rationalist frame of reference and "pressure from the private sector to keep costs for service providers and families down" (Fenech et al., 2012, p. 8).

The different histories and disparities in knowledge and skills required in the two sectors have a continuing presence that in many ways perpetuates these differences. Until recently, the skills and knowledge required by educators working in the before-school sector in Australia have been defined largely by vocational education and certificate level training, and many educators have certificate and diploma qualifications (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2011, 2014; Cheeseman & Torr, 2009; see Table 1). Recent research has found that pre-service early childhood teacher education students are reluctant to work in child care (Thorpe, Boyd, Ailwood & Brownlee, 2011) and associate a four-year early childhood teaching degree with the work of 'educating' school aged children (Gibson, 2013). These demarcations support the Productivity Commission's (2011, 2014) concern about qualified early childhood teachers preferring to work in the early years of schooling; and the unfortunate association (by default) of seemingly not 'educating' those in the before school sector. Vocationally-oriented qualifications, low status, female domination, and poor remuneration and working conditions (Andrew, 2014; Osgood, 2012) have meant that historically, particular forms of knowledge have been privileged; specifically, vocational pedagogy, which is usually job specific and frequently provides little experience with abstract or theoretical knowledge (Wheelahan, 2011). These historical differences are reflected in the higher percentage of staff with four-year degree qualifications or equivalent employed in preschool settings, and the higher percentage of staff with diploma qualifications employed in long day care (Table 1). Yet, as a result of the reforms we examine here, *all* educators who work with children in preschool and long day care are now required to enact the *Framework*, irrespective of whether qualifications are vocationally oriented or theoretically informed. The 'implied ideal professional practitioner' in this policy is, therefore, one who engages in work typically associated with qualified teachers, regardless of the qualifications held.

Table 1: Percentage of staff delivering a preschool program by qualification level (Source: SRC, 2014, pp. 27-28)

Qualification	Long day care	Preschool
Bachelor degree pass (4 years or equivalent) and above; ECE teaching, or related teaching qualifications	22.4	33.7
Bachelor degree pass (3 years or equivalent); ECE teaching, or related teaching qualifications	10.7	11.1
Advanced Diploma/Diploma	3.1	5.1
Other ECEC-related field at Diploma level (e.g., child care, nursing, human welfare studies, behavioural science)	31.1	16.1
Other ECEC-related field at Certificate level	31.8	32.4
Any ECEC field - qualification unknown	0.9	1.6

With the current reforms in early childhood education and care in Australia, these different histories of early childhood care (childcare) and education (preschool) have been put aside, at least administratively, in a restructuring of governance systems. Practically however, these differences are rendered invisible with the requirement that all educators who have contact with children must enact the *Framework.* Previously, this differentiated system has had two relatively distinct purposes: (1) providing childcare to enable parents to participate in the workforce, and (2) preparing children for school through preschool education (Thorpe et al., 2010). In their review of early childhood education and care, Thorpe et al. (2010) note how these purposes have manifested in each sector with a concentrated focus on regulation around safety and hygiene and a lack of focus on education in the childcare sector; and an emphasis on narrow versions of school readiness in preschool provision. These quite different intentions and what they mean for educators required to enact the *Framework* have been overlooked from the perspectives of policy and remuneration and conditions for differently qualified staff, and suggest that educators who are not qualified teachers are valued in economic terms only. They also suggest that non-qualified teachers have been excluded from "reciprocity in relations of power and authority" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 158), or what Fraser (2007, 2008a) might call the right of all members of a community to participate actively in decision making in political spaces or to be represented equitably. Given the reform agenda and these historical differences, the next section of our article examines what the *Framework* requires of educators to preface broader consideration of the policy's social justice effects.

Mandated policy

The early childhood education reform agenda (COAG, 2009b) required all services receiving the childcare benefit to use the *Framework* or an approved equivalent from January 1, 2012. In 2013, 71 per cent of preschools in Australia based the program exclusively on the

Framework and a further 21 per cent used the *Framework* in conjunction with another curriculum or framework (SRC, 2014, p. 22). For preschool programs delivered in long day care settings, 79.1 per cent of services used the *Framework* exclusively and another 15.1 per cent used the *Framework* in combination with another curriculum or framework (AG, 2009, p. 26). Large percentages of educators throughout Australia are using the *Framework* as the sole source of information and even larger percentages are using it in conjunction with another document. Considering the qualifications of educators (Table 1), just under one third of staff in long day care settings are qualified teachers (with three or four year degrees) and less than one half of teachers in preschools are similarly qualified. This means that there are large proportions of educators enacting the *Framework* who are not qualified teachers. The *Framework* defines all "early childhood practitioners who work directly with children in early childhood settings" as "educators" (AG, 2009, p. 5). While the term "educators" is inclusive and respectful of the contribution to learning made by all involved in the education and care of young children, the expectation for all educators working directly with children to use the *Framework* (or an approved alternative) was issued to the presumed end-users of the policy through explicit references within a complementary policy text: "If you work with young children you are responsible for using the Framework" (AG, 2010, p. 6). The 'ideal professional practitioner' or, in this case, 'educator' is expected to be able to enact the policy requirements irrespective of whether s/he is a qualified teacher or not, and the type of qualifications held.

Two issues arise because much of the language used in the *Framework* is typically associated with the work of qualified teachers, including terms such as learning, assessment for learning, intentional teaching, pedagogy/ies, play-based learning, and scaffolding (Grieshaber, 2010; Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011). Indeed, Ortlipp et al. (2011) suggest that use of such terms marks a shift from discourses of nurturing and care to those of teaching and accountability. They also propose that learning outcomes (as found in the *Framework*) can be associated with more technicist approaches. The first issue that arises from the mandatory nature of the *Framework* and the language it employs is that regardless of the extent of training, qualifications and remuneration, all educators are now required to take responsibility for learning and assessment by "planning, documenting and evaluating children's learning… [to] determine the extent to which all children are progressing toward realising learning outcomes and if not, what might be impeding their progress" (AG, 2009, p. 17). However, planning, documenting and evaluating learning are typically associated with the work of qualified teachers (Loughran, 2010). The focus on play-based learning, intentional teaching, learning, outcomes, and high expectations and equity also sets the *Framework* apart from traditional approaches to early childhood education in the before school sector in Australia (Grieshaber, 2010). Prior to the *Framework*, early childhood education in the before-school sector was characterised by an emphasis on children's growth and development (as distinct from learning), 'free' or uninterrupted play (as opposed to play-based learning), and little focus (if any) on outcomes or high expectations (Grieshaber, 2010). Play-based learning has now been mandated by the *Framework*, which also emphasises intentional teaching.

This means that anyone who works directly with children is now required to engage in intentional teaching and promote play-based learning, and the explanation of intentional teaching resonates closely with what teachers are expected to do. For instance, teaching strategies are named (e.g., modelling, demonstrating, open questioning, problem solving...), and educators are expected to actively "promote children's learning" through the conceptualisation and development of intellectually rewarding learning experiences that will "foster high-level thinking skills" and "extend children's thinking and learning" (AG, 2009,

p. 5). While these are outcomes that are more likely to result from intentional teaching, there is a fine line between emergent approaches to early childhood education curriculum, which are based on children's interests and free play, and the type of learning promoted in the *Framework* that occurs through intentional teaching and play-based approaches (see Grieshaber, 2010). Educators are also involved in assessment by documenting and monitoring children's learning, however these too are roles usually associated with qualified teachers and teaching (Loughran, 2010).

Responsibility for learning and assessment is formalised in a National Quality Standard (NQS) that consists of seven quality areas. Examples of more specific requirements of educators are: "Each child's learning and development is assessed as part of an ongoing cycle of planning, documenting and evaluation" (Element 1.2.1, Quality Area 1); and "Educators respond to children's ideas and plan and use intentional teaching to scaffold and extend each child's learning" (Element 1.2.2, Quality Area 1) (ACECQA, 2015b). It is our contention that these tasks require the use of techniques and strategies which are learnt during the process of formal study required for a teaching qualification and are rightly the responsibility of qualified teachers. The ideal professional practitioner is therefore expected to fulfill the requirements of what is typically expected of qualified teachers, regardless of qualifications held.

The second and most consequential issue is that the emphasis on children's educational attainment requires all educators to be involved in complex educational work. This renders the *Framework's* requirements for intentional teaching, play-based learning, assessment, and so on problematic for those who are not qualified teachers. It therefore makes sense to expect increasing levels of education, as has been legislated. However, it also means that some educators could be pushed into credentialing processes that might not be of their choosing, and which could result in no/little increase in remuneration or improvement in working conditions. Indeed, the 2013 workforce census (SRC, 2014) showed that 50.0 and 50.8 per cent of employees in preschool and long day care respectively were not engaged in further study because they considered "it is not worth the time and money to study further – any resulting wage increase is too small" (p. 36). These educators could be said to be exercising agency but their action is unlikely to be the result of representative justice (Fraser, 2007, 2008a), as there is little evidence they were actively involved or represented equitably in the political spaces where decisions were made to support educators to become more highly qualified. Thus the social justice effects of the policy compound with the expectation that the lowest paid and least qualified educators enact the *Framework* with the same knowledge, skills and professionalism as those who are the highest paid and most highly qualified. In the remainder of this paper, we further consider Rizvi and Lingard's (2010) second question relating to social justice effects by examining the work of educators and qualified teachers and how each has been positioned historically. We conclude with the view that the effects of the policy are likely to be inequitable – even if there were to be a significant upskilling of the workforce - if the duties expected of educators and qualified teachers remain the same, whilst the conditions and remuneration of educators do not also change.

The work of educators and qualified teachers

Despite the current reform agenda in Australia, vast differences remain between long day care and preschool settings in terms of working conditions, remuneration, benefits, status and public attitudes (Productivity Commission, 2014). Moss (2006) has pointed out that those working in the childcare sector have often been seen as technicians, while staff in the early education sector have been considered educators. In Australia, qualified childcare workers (e.g., those working in long day care) have generally been exposed to technical training for

one to three years, and teachers in early education settings such as preschools have a university education with a three or four year degree (Thorpe et al., 2010). These differences played out industrially in the Australian state of Queensland in 1996, where the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission (QIRC) handed down a landmark decision in response to a claim that early childhood teachers working in long day care should receive pay parity with teachers in other sectors (Burton & Lyons, 2000). During the hearing, discussion was reduced to one issue: whether teachers employed in long day care were *actually* teaching. The Commission found that teachers in long day care were not teaching – they were providing a developmental program and, because a developmental program required less skill, teachers did *not* deserve pay parity. The finding was widely debated at the time and contributed to maintaining the division between care and education in Australia.

The USA *Eager to Learn* report (Bowman, Donovan & Burns, 2001) and UNICEF (2008) have both indicated that care and education are co-existent and cannot be separated. More recently, Sims (2014) has argued that the National Quality Standard (NQS) (COAG, 2009b) and the *Framework* (AG, 2009) reflect the position that care and education are intertwined at practice and policy levels, and that it is not possible to have one without the other. In contrast to many approaches to early childhood education, the *Framework* privileges intentional teaching and play based learning over child development knowledge (Grieshaber, 2010). The expectations of Australian early childhood educators regarding play-based learning, intentional teaching, learning, outcomes, and high expectations and equity are problematic given the qualifications of educators delivering preschool programs in long day care and preschool settings (Table 1) and the high percentages of educators using the *Framework*. However, they are complicated by further, more implicit, expectations of early childhood educators. For example, we contend that the *Framework* is what might be called a low definition document because it creates a vision of what is possible. It does this by providing a guide for professional decision-making without prescribing details of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. As a low definition document, however, the *Framework* also requires educators to go beyond child development knowledge and to engage in intentional teaching, play-based learning, assess children's progress and so on (Grieshaber, 2010), all of which are features of the work of teachers (Loughran, 2010).

Schleicher (2008) uses the term 'informed professionalism' to talk about syllabus and curriculum documents in the compulsory years of schooling, and how qualified teachers use low definition curriculum documents to make decisions about content, resources and teaching approaches. Achieving the right balance of 'informed prescription' and 'informed professionalism' (Schleicher, 2008) means making decisions about what is set centrally in a syllabus and what is left for schools and individual teachers to decide. If overly prescriptive, syllabi and other teacher materials can reduce teacher professionalism and promote reliance on 'how to' resources and pre-packaged kits that promote technical and a-contextual approaches to teaching and learning (see Apple, 1978). We suggest that the *Framework* identifies a particular model of "educators", which includes an understanding of informed professionalism that is more implicit than explicit. This implies that educators should be able to convert the principles, practice and outcomes of the *Framework* into lived practice that enhances children's learning (as per AG, 2009). However, the proliferation of books and other materials since the publication of the *Framework* suggests that this may not be the case. The lack of prescription seems to have prompted the market to fill the void with "how to" instruction manuals for educators, regardless of the type of qualifications held.

The proliferation of publications also suggests that 'interpretations' of the *Framework* are needed to assist educators, as their daily work requirements include expectations for which their formal qualifications have not/are not preparing them. Publication of official documents such as the *Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for*

Australia (AG, 2010) and *The Early Years Learning Framework in Action: Educators' stories and models for practice* (no author, no date) soon after the Framework was released could have set a precedent for the publication of guides, manuals and models. While this mushrooming of resources is not the result of centralised over prescription of curriculum (learning) documents, it does suggest a lack of balance between informed professionalism and informed prescription. This proliferation has the potential to reduce teacher professionalism for degree-qualified teachers and sanction technical approaches for all educators (Apple, 1978; Moss, 2006) given that the effects of qualified (and unqualified) teachers adopting technical approaches are unknown (Luke, Woods & Weir, 2013).

The claim we make here is that many of the expectations identified in the *Framework* that relate to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment have historically been associated with the work of qualified teachers. This is based on the understanding that policy enactment "is a creative, sophisticated and complex process" that involves the "interpretation, recontextualisation and translation of … policy ideas into contextualised practices" (Braun et al., 2010, p. 549). Given the abundance of resources (including 'how to' interpretations) published in response to the *Framework*; that all educators working directly with children in the aforementioned settings are required to use the *Framework* or an approved alternative, and that formal curriculum documents need to be "taken up and enacted" by educators to have an effect (Ortlipp et al., 2011, p. 59) (which can be unknown), we ask whether it is equitable to expect all those who work in early childhood education and care settings (specifically in this paper, long day care and preschool) to enact the *Framework*, regardless of whether they are qualified or in the process of becoming qualified, and regardless of the nature of qualification held or being undertaken. The point is one of in/equity rather than the idea that qualifications are the basis on which educators enact policy. And this in/equity is grounded in moral concerns of (lack of) representation, respect, recognition, rights, opportunities and power (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), as educators appear to have been excluded or not represented equitably from political justice decision-making spaces (Fraser, 2007, 2008a). In the final section of this paper to follow, we synthesise the issues raised to clearly outline the implications of the policy.

Differences by degree: History, equity and philosophy

The mandated national learning *Framework* expects educators to draw "on a range of perspectives and theories" which can "challenge traditional ways of seeing children, teaching and learning" (AG, 2009, p. 11). While these are important for the field of early childhood education in terms of providing high quality and equitable programs (as claimed in the *Framework*), expectations established by policy can create issues for educators who hold vocational qualifications. To draw on a range of perspectives and theories, especially those which challenge traditional ways of seeing children, teaching and learning, requires educators to engage with abstract knowledge not usually developed through vocational education. We acknowledge that experienced educators with or without certificate and diploma qualifications may be able to do this, however, our point is whether the same expectations should be required of degree qualified teachers and educators with vocational qualifications and corresponding remuneration (or who are in the process of becoming qualified), given the difference between vocational pedagogy and the more abstract and theoretical knowledge associated with bachelor degree qualifications. Put simply, there are few, if any other occupations where staff are required to engage in work for which they are not formally qualified nor appropriately remunerated. This invisibility hides issues of inequity, which are connected to use of the generic term 'educator' for all those who engage in contact work with young children. Issues of inequity relate to parity of political representation of minority

groups and equitable representation or political voice in decisions that affect the everyday work of educators and how they are required to do it (Fraser, 2008b). Staff who are not qualified teachers may associate the term (educator) with a more respectful and professional approach, but there is no difference between qualified teachers and other staff in terms of the work in which educators with direct contact are expected to engage.

Policy enactment is complex (Braun et al., 2010) and this is further complicated in the Australian early childhood education context because the *Framework* requires all educators in direct contact with children to make decisions about pedagogy, principles, resources, assessment and learning outcomes, especially when these responsibilities are usually associated with degree qualified teachers. The task becomes more convoluted when considering the low-definition of the policy document and the presumption of informed professionalism that this implies. The historical differences between education and care in Australia must also be taken into account. Degree-qualified teachers experience policy enactment as complex (Braun et al., 2010), and a low definition document adds layers of intricacy and sophistication because of the personal and intellectual engagement required of those involved. As the *Framework* is an aspirational document, it is likely that educators will face challenges enacting it. Added to these factors is the historical marginalisation (c.f., Fraser, 2008b) of the long day care sector, which in current circumstances may be under-prepared for the task at hand. Maternalism has often been seen as the primary qualification for employment in long day care (Ailwood, 2008), but motherhood does not *necessarily* equip educators to enact a complex and intellectually engaging learning framework. There is only so much that professional development can hope to achieve in a short time in up-skilling educators regardless of whether they have bachelor degrees, certificates or diplomas, or are in the process of becoming qualified.

This is because many early childhood educators engage in professional development only after having begun working with young children and many have never experienced a mentoring relationship (Whitebook, 2010). Historically, the before school sector in Australia has engaged in minimal and often "one-off" professional development opportunities (Productivity Commission, 2011). Professional development by preschool and long day care staff in Australia is voluntary and employers are responsible for providing it, although financial support is provided to cover training costs (OECD, 2012). The removal of fees for those studying for diplomas and advanced diplomas in child care and children's services has reduced the financial load (OECD, 2012), although this does not increase the number of degree qualified teachers. And as mentioned, educators are reluctant to engage in further study because they consider that improving qualifications does not bring remuneration commensurate with the necessary effort and investment (SRC, 2014). Continued undervaluing of educators only heightens concerns about recognising and respecting their rights to participate actively or be represented equitably in political decision-making spaces (Fraser, 2007, 2008b). However, as part of workforce reform, the government has created additional university places for educators with advanced diplomas to enrol in "degrees tailored to the[ir] needs" to upgrade their qualifications (OECD, 2012). So far this has proved troublesome for some, as universities often require students to enrol in two subjects per semester for two years, and a reduction to one subject per semester is not possible in some universities (Personal Communication, 2011). Studying at university for the first time can be challenging, and even more so when educators are working (full or part time) and have other responsibilities connected to their professional and personal lives.

The increasing complexity of policy enactment (Braun et al., 2010) and the current reform climate create distinct challenges for the Australian before school sector, specifically for those who are not qualified teachers but who are expected to perform curriculum,

teaching, learning and assessment tasks associated with qualified teachers. This situation seems peculiar to early childhood education and is most likely associated with the aforementioned low status, female domination, and poor conditions and remuneration that characterise the sector. In these circumstances, for the field to regenerate and up-skill itself is a form of policy optimism that could well remain unrealised unless strong support is provided to assist those who are not qualified teachers to undertake the (teaching, learning and assessment) tasks required and, at the same time, avoid technical and a-contextual approaches. The question is whether it is equitable to expect the lowest paid and least qualified educators to enact the *Framework* with the same knowledge, skills and professionalism as those who are the highest paid and most highly qualified.

Conclusion

The *Australian Early Learning Years Framework* forms part of a policy vision that "All children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and the nation" (AG, 2009, p. 5). If the aim of the Framework is to create better futures for children, communities and society; what effects does this expectation have on how those in the workforce enter into relationships with each other in early childhood settings? Are lines of demarcation being (re)established between qualified teachers (who 'actually' teach) and those who provide a 'development program' (requiring less skill) (Burton & Lyons, 2000)? Given that our analysis shows that the *Framework* expects all "early childhood practitioners who work directly with children in early childhood settings" (AG, 2009, p. 5) to engage in work traditionally associated with degree qualified teachers, we contend that the instrument designed to realise that vision is inequitable in both intent and implementation. For those who are not qualified teachers and working in long day care and preschool settings in Australia, the values of social justice and equity that we outlined at the beginning of this article have been submerged beneath dominant economic concerns. The 'implied ideal professional practitioner' is therefore one who is consistently upskilling; performing the work of a qualified teacher but not being remunerated as a teacher, and not being represented equitably in political decision making space. The policy expectations enact power relations that create inequitable conditions for those who are not qualified teachers. These conditions affect the everyday work of educators and how they are required to do it. While this may be an unintended consequence, it has material outcomes and effects that reach beyond symbolism and which trouble the inequity of expecting the lowest paid and least qualified educators to enact the *Framework* with the same knowledge, skills and professionalism as those who are the highest paid and most highly qualified.

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[1] While the *Framework* was published in 2009, the ongoing reforms in the sector legislated that it or an approved alternative be implemented from 1 January, 2012. The *Framework* is the nationally approved learning Framework for children preschool age or under. In the state of Victoria, an approved alternative is *The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* (VEYLDF). Alternatives are approved by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA).

[2] The term 'educator' is used in the Framework to refer to all staff who engage in 'contact' work with young children, regardless of the qualification held.